

GLOBAL

A New Problem in Ireland: Where to Find a Non-Catholic School?

As the country grows less religious, parents struggle to place their kids in classrooms where Catechism memorization doesn't come standard.

AARON SCHRANK OCT 3, 2013



Morning commuters and two schoolgirls pass a billboard in Dublin, Ireland, on Sept. 26, 2013. (Shawn Pogatchnik/AP)

DUBLIN—Sarah Lennon's son Ethan is just 7 weeks old, and she's already stressing out about his applications for primary schools. A lapsed Catholic, she hopes to land him a spot at a sought-after multi-denominational school in suburban Dublin—one of few alternatives to the Church-run schools in her neighborhood.

"It's quite urgent to have our name down early and have the Catholic school here as a back up," Lennon said. "But the Catholic school may not admit our

son, unless we have his form in early, because he won't be baptized."

Lennon is among a growing number of Irish parents who no longer identify with the Catholic Church and struggle to find schools that don't clash with their convictions. In Ireland—once considered the most Catholic country in the world—the Catholic Church runs more than 90 percent of all public schools. Other religious groups operate another 6 percent. But Ireland's religiosity has waned in recent years, amid changing demographics, rising secularism and reports of Church sexual abuse and cover-ups.

Weekly church attendance among Irish Catholics dropped from more than 90 percent to 30 percent in the past four decades. Those in Ireland who identify as religious plummeted from 69 percent in 2005 to just 47 percent last year, according to a WIN-Gallup International poll. And the number of people who chose "no religion" in the last census soared, making non-believers the second largest group in the nation.

These changes are starting to crack the Catholic Church's monopoly on Irish education, but not quickly enough to meet growing parental demand for school diversity. Polls show that as many as three in four parents say they would send their children to schools run by groups other than churches, if given the choice. But alternatives are sparse. The most prominent substitute for church-run education is a multi-denominational model from Educate Together, a group with no church affiliation that operates just 65 of Ireland's nearly 3,200 primary schools.

Even Catholic leaders acknowledge the problem. Dublin's Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has been pushing for more Catholic schools to be handed over to other groups.

"I am the legal owner of about 85 percent of all elementary schools in this diocese, and I have been saying for some time that this does not reflect the realities—and that we have to move forward," Martin said.

Working towards Martin's goal, Ireland's Education Minister Ruairi Quinn established an unprecedented Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in 2011,

which was aimed at gauging parental demand for new types of schools and recommending changes to accommodate religious diversity.

School watchers see these efforts as a watershed moment in Irish education, even if their impact remains to be seen.

“The Catholic Church has always had the lion’s share in controlling education and, up until recently, no one has been brave enough to come forward and say, ‘Can we do it in a different way?’” said Dublin City University lecturer James O’Higgins Norman.

Irish primary schools are essentially publicly funded, but privately run. The government pays for school construction, teacher salaries and grants based on school enrollment, but private groups—mostly churches—provide the education. They are required to teach a standard state curriculum, and 30 minutes per day is set aside for religious instruction. For the vast majority of children who attend Catholic schools, that means preparation for Communion and Confirmation is part of the state-sanctioned school day—an unwelcome reality for some parents.

Martijn Leenheer and his family moved from Holland to a rural village in County Leitrim, Ireland, in search of a quieter town for raising their son, Finn. An atheist, Leenheer was concerned about exposing his son to Church doctrine at the local Catholic school, and he chose to opt Finn out of the 30-minute religion class—a constitutional right afforded to all Irish parents.

Three months later, Leenheer was surprised to learn his son was still sitting in the class on most days, as well as reciting prayers in other parts of the school day. Leenheer contacted the principal to clarify things, but was repeatedly ignored, he said.

“We didn’t realize we chose the most rural bit of Ireland to live in,” said Leenheer. “We never thought it was going to be this serious, this in-your-face-religion.”

Leenheer’s insistence on opting his son out led to his family being ostracized in his community, he said. He pulled Finn out of the Catholic school, moved

to a new neighborhood and enrolled him at an Educate Together school in Sligo.

At the 2 percent of primary schools run by Educate Together, religious education looks a bit different.

Inside Dublin 7 Educate Together School—one of the 31 Educate Together schools in the Dublin area—teachers and parent-volunteers are performing Irish folk tunes on guitars, fiddles, and elbow pipes as first and second-graders clap along. This celebration has no precise religious overtones. The wall behind them is decked out with an array of colorful sacred symbols—from the Christian cross to the Sikh Khanda.

Multi-denominational schools such as this one are in demand among non-Catholic immigrants, a burgeoning contingent of atheists and agnostics, and Catholic or Protestant parents looking to expose their children to something new.

School principal Aine Sotscheck admits that even Educate Together has never really ironed out the meaning of her school's "multi-denominational" moniker.

"For some people, it means that their religious affiliation is stamped on their forehead, they are a percentage of the school community, all religious beliefs are discussed and taught and each one is given approval as being fine," Sotscheck said. "For me, it's about acknowledging belief systems, while recognizing there are so many aspects to a person's identity that aren't based on religion."

Educate Together teachers spend their required 30-minute religious education period teaching about different religious practices and moral issues, endorsing no particular creed. The group recently even introduced atheism, agnosticism, and humanism into its curriculum, alongside other belief systems.

“Schools are finding that difficult,” said Fionnuala Ward, Educate Together’s primary education officer. “You’ll always be able to find lovely material on Diwali, Eid, Christmas or Hanukkah, things that really lend themselves to the classroom. But teaching atheism is a bit more difficult.”

To improve this part of the curriculum, Educate Together recently enlisted the help of Atheist Ireland, an association dedicated to “promoting atheism, reason and an ethical, secular state.” The group will raise funds and hire education experts to develop lesson plans about the tenets of atheism—and will pilot the curriculum in several Educate Together schools next year.

“They don’t have any materials to teach about atheism, so it’ll fill that gap,” said Atheist Ireland chairman Michael Nugent.

Nugent notes that his group is not pushing for atheist schools, but rather pluralistic, objective alternatives to religious ones.

“We’re not looking for schools that actively teach there are no gods,” he said, but contended that essentially, atheist students currently face the opposite phenomenon. “But, hypothetically, if there was even just one atheist school in the country that was actively teaching that there is no god, and even one set of religious parents were forced to send their child to that school—and their child was being taught there was no god and chanting incantations about there being no god, they’d just freak out completely.”

Educate Together doesn’t keep tabs on the religious backgrounds of its students, but Sotscheck estimates around 30 percent of her Dublin school’s 340 students come from Catholic families. Fourth-grade teacher Wesley O’Broin said that while some of his students make their backgrounds or beliefs known in class, he mostly has no idea.

“It’s hard to tell, because I’m not sure there’s much difference between an Irish Catholic and an Irish agnostic,” he said while supervising a co-ed game of Gaelic football.

Educate Together is a solution for some Irish parents seeking alternatives to Church-run education, but not all. Most of the group’s schools have first-

come, first-served enrollment policies and long waiting lists. “We have people calling in as early as their birth week,” Sotscheck said.

And most of the schools are located in urban centers, a reality education experts say minimizes their impact.

“Educate Together doesn’t address the difficulties that parents of other faiths or of no faiths would have in rural areas,” said Sheelagh Drudy, a former professor of education at University College Dublin. “And that’s a huge issue for parents who live in those circumstances.”

CEO Paul Rowe said Educate Together hopes to someday be an option for all Irish parents.

“We’re not at that point, and we’re determined to be at that point before 2050,” Rowe said. “The fundamental problem we have is a lack of places.”

That’s a problem Education Minister Quinn is slowly addressing. Within the last year, his department surveyed parents in 43 areas around Ireland that have an oversupply of Church-run schools, and found sufficient demand for new types of schools in two-thirds of those areas, according to the Department of Education.

Quinn suggested that as many as half of all Catholic schools could eventually be handed off to other groups, but some Catholic leaders dispute whether the survey results are truly a mandate for such extensive changes.

Father Michael Drumm of the Catholic Schools Partnership said the surveys showed that only a small number of parents wanted change.

“What we learned is that close to 10 percent of parents with children in Catholic schools would prefer another form of patronage,” Drumm told the *Irish Times*.

But Archbishop Martin welcomes radical changes to school ownership. He thinks letting go of a large number of Catholic schools will actually strengthen the beleaguered Church.

“My idea would be to develop a model where there would be Catholic schools for parents who want Catholic schools, and they would be schools of excellence, as would all the other schools be,” said Martin. “The Catholic Church failed in its approach to religious education. We’ve had a very strong presence in Catholic schools and the end product is we don’t see many young people in Ireland in church.”

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